



2032323

DAILY INTERLAKE

KALISPELL, MT 59904

MON., FRI., 14, 291 SUN., 16, 136

FEB 14 2002

SUPERIOR CLIPPING SERVICE

GLENDALE, MT 406-365-6612

40- County may manage new health fund

By BRENT SHRUM
Special to the Inter Lake

LIBBY — Lincoln County government is headed toward managing \$2.75 million intended to meet health-care needs of victims of asbestos-related disease.

Local officials, health-care providers and asbestos victims advocates had initially thought the county was not eligible to receive the settlement money. Therefore discussions were focused on forming a nonprofit corporation to manage the money.

But in a telephone conference on Friday, Environmental Protection Agency attorney Matthew Cohn said the county may be able to take the money after all.

"Right now, I don't see a barrier to the county participating in this," Cohn said.

W.R. Grace & Co. will provide the money for health care to settle an access dispute with the federal agency. The settlement says a local nonprofit entity must be approved by Grace and the U.S. Department of Justice to manage the money.

The money is to be used for health-care needs not met by Grace's existing medical plan. Those include tests for people exposed to asbestos — but not diagnosed with any asbestos-related disease — and long-term nursing home care for asbestos victims.

The Lincoln County Community Health Center had been under consideration to manage the money, but its board declined the offer last week. Other possibilities included an asbestos victims group and a reorganized version of the hospital's Center for Asbestos Related Disease, or a completely new board of people representing various interests.

The settlement has been approved by a bankruptcy court and is ready to be returned to a federal judge in Missoula for his signature. The judge's signature starts a 10-day timeline during which a nonprofit entity must come forward to accept the money.

The Justice Department probably will delay submitting the paperwork to the judge to allow local officials to get organized, Cohn said, but may not want to delay the process for too long.

"I know they are willing to wait," he said. "The question is, how long?"

County Commissioner John Konzen told Cohn the county might be the best choice to manage the money.

"That may be the easiest and most applicable place for it to go," he said.

A private nonprofit corporation might be the best choice in the long run, but for now the money should go to the county, said county health officer Dr. Brad Black.

"We're going to need some mechanism," he said. "I think the county may be the best to bring the community together to figure out how to disburse funds."

Asbestos victims advocate Gayla Benefield agreed that allowing the county to take the money would be preferable to trying to organize a new board on short notice.

"It takes care of a great, big headache," she said.